

DON CIO Provides Tools for Information Accessibility

By Nicolle Hackman and Scott Lubow



Leading the effort to provide information accessibility for all Internet users, the Department of the Navy Chief Information Officer (DON CIO) recently released the second edition of its Section 508 Self-Help Toolkit. On the heels of Secretary of the Navy Instruction 5720.47A, which set the standards for Section 508 compliance in 2003, the DON CIO developed the self-help toolkit as a means to assist professionals involved with federal information technology (IT) in making their information accessible to all Internet users.

Since the original release of the toolkit, which was requested by multiple DON organizations, the accessibility and usability of DON Web sites have shown marked improvement.

While other informational Web sites and documents exist, DON CIO's Section 508 toolkit is particularly significant because it is a stand-alone tool that provides practical "how to" information for making IT accessible and, with its military examples, is geared specifically toward the Navy and Marine Corps. Additionally, the toolkit is available on compact disc for personnel who do not have Internet access, for example Navy personnel at sea.

The objective of the Section 508 Self-Help Toolkit is to provide the Department of the Navy and the federal sector with a comprehensive "package" of technical guidance and resources to comply with accessibility requirements for Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, as amended.

What is Section 508?

In 1998, Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. 794d) and strengthened provisions covering access to information in the federal sector. As amended, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires access for people with disabilities to the federal government's electronic and information technology (EIT), unless providing access would constitute an undue burden, defined as significant difficulty or expense.

However, even in cases of undue burden, the information and data on government Web sites must still be provided in a reasonable alternate format to those who request it.

The law covers all types of EIT in the federal sector including Web sites, software, computers, copiers, telephones, fax machines and kiosks. The definition of IT used in Section 508 is consistent with that found in Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) 2.101: "EIT is any equipment or interconnected system or subsystem of equipment that is used in the creation, conversion or duplication of data or information."

The goals for Section 508 are to eliminate barriers in accessing information technology and to stimulate the development of assistive technologies for better accessibility. Specifically, it applies to six EIT categories: (1) Software applications and operating systems; (2) Web-based intranet and Internet information and applications; (3) Telecommunications products; (4) Video and multimedia products; (5) Self-contained, closed products, such as copiers, printers and fax machines; and (6) Desktop and portable computers.

In addition, product support documentation and support services, including help desks, must now be accessible.

DON CIO's Answer

DON CIO's Section 508 toolkit provides practical information for each of the six EIT categories in a modular approach and explains and offers solutions for working in each area. In addition to individual modules dedicated to each of the EIT categories, it also features sections for acquisitions, accommodations and accessing additional resources.

The toolkit also offers Web resource links that provide a "one-stop-shop" for accessing a multitude of Web sites that contain information about Section 508 and accessibility. For ease of use, the module is divided into relevant categories including: Government Web Sites, Media Web Sites, University/Research Web Sites, Industry/Vendor Accessibility/Section 508 Web Sites, Useful Web Tools and DON Blanket Purchase Agreements.

What's New

The latest release of the tool adds Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Adobe portable document format (PDF) modules. These additions provide users with the latest information, guidelines and tips with step-by-step instructions for making documents accessible.

The Word and PowerPoint modules provide information for making files accessible using Microsoft Word and Microsoft PowerPoint. These modules explain key areas such as document structure, templates, styles, forms, tables, and multimedia, as well as how to convert Word documents to accessible PowerPoint and PDF formats.

The PDF module provides information for making new and existing PDF files accessible using Adobe Acrobat versions 6.0 and 7.0. It also explains the inherent issues of image-only PDF files and limitations on the types of files that can and cannot be made accessible. Finally, it offers detailed information on the structure and tags within PDF files and instructions to check the accessibility of PDF files.

The DON CIO remains committed to supporting federal government better business practices and equality in information availability initiatives. The Section 508 Toolkit, which will assist in enabling full Section 508 compliance across the Department, is available on the DON CIO Web site at www.doncio.navy.mil.

Nicolle Hackman, of Burke Consortium, Inc., and Scott Lubow, of Booz-Allen Hamilton, provide Section 508 support to the DON CIO. CHIPS